

Knowledge and Social Control

Krishna Kumar

The Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia edited by Nigel Crook; Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996; Rs 495.

THIS book is about the relations between education and power. Religion and the media have also been included in this theme. The appearance of this volume offers some reassurance to the effect that the desire to examine factors controlling access to knowledge has not quite drowned in the din of post-modernism and internetism. It makes sense that the attempt has been made at the behest of historians. Their focus is south Asia, or rather the pre-partition territory of India; in fact, mainly northern India. This rather narrow concept of south Asia notwithstanding, the volume can be said to introduce a much-needed corrective into the remarkably parochial body of literature produced by European and North American scholars, such as Bourdieu and Apple, on production and reproduction of knowledge. At times it looks as if these eminent progressive scholars have no concern for societies less materially endowed in the prevailing international order than their own. A recent tome, entitled *Education: Culture, Economy, Society*, edited by A H Halsey and others (OUP, 1997), has not one among its 52 essays about the colonially exploited parts of the world. The south Asia focus of the present volume also, to a modest extent, compensates the neglect of education as an important sphere of the study of Indian history. The seminar at which the papers published here were first presented was held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1991.

Nigel Crook's introductory essay summarises the common concern of the contributors as an attempt to conceptualise and describe the social agenda underlying the transmission of knowledge. The obvious question, whether south Asia can be seen as a single socio-cultural unit, is recognised and disposed of early, with the statement that "in this volume we are more inclined to focus on the plurality of cultures". "More inclined" is accurate, because the volume simply does not have enough contributions which might represent the demographic, geographical, religious and linguistic diversity of the Indian subcontinent, let alone the rest of south Asia. Bengal emerges as one area of focus; the Indo-Gangetic belt as another. Neither is fortuitous, because these are the areas about which some decent spade work on educational history exists. In terms of

chronological range, the 19th century finds more room than any other period. Wendy Doniger discusses ancient Indian myths about power in sexual relations; Bayly (whose essay I will discuss below) refers to the 18th century; Barbara Metcalf looks at the Tablighi Jama'at movement of the early 20th century; Avril Powell and Jayant Lele examine, respectively, school history books and the politics of Hindu revivalism. The remaining seven papers are about colonialism and its encounter with what was left of indigenous India in the 19th century. If we call the 19th century the core concern of this volume, we are still left with the problem of agreeing with the editor that there is an organising idea in these papers. According to him, the theme running through the volume is the tension between the need to disseminate knowledge (defined as information plus the cognitive competence to put it to use functionally and to produce further knowledge) in order to improve efficiency of control and, on the other hand, to consolidate the existing hold over knowledge to avoid struggle and instability. This tension is perceived from the perspective of the powerful, not the underdog - and that is the first of a series of caveats the editor is constrained to acknowledge in his laudable effort to give the volume a unity.

Apart from the introductory piece, the piece by C A Bayly offers some help for the reader to picture a landscape in this otherwise rather straggling volume. Bayly's survey of the later pre-colonial and early colonial periods, drawing on his own well known work, points to the existence and vibrancy of a larger India than the one which reflected the effects of colonial presence and control in visible ways. This larger India, inhabited by men of indigenous knowledge, by artists, and by craftsmen, absorbed new ideas and influences of the wider world at its own pace, according to Bayly. The usual story of colonial impact, especially on the elite strata who adjusted their skills and roles rather dramatically with the help of education, tends to make us myopic towards this larger India and its significance in shaping history. This thesis opens up a vista of enquiry. It would be interesting, for example, to know how the slow and more self-confident absorption of the west's technical and scientific advances

fared in the later colonial and post-colonial periods. The idea advanced by both Bayly and Crook, that different sections of society had very different cycles of the gain and loss of strength in the context of knowledge deserves further attention.

An important theme this collection touches upon is that of the clash between the old, indigenous institutional order and the one that speedily swept it aside during the 19th century. Poromesh Acharya and Kazi Shahiduliah investigate the village parthshalas of Bengal from this perspective, concentrating on curricular change. The generally accepted view that colonial administrative policies disrupted these schools is upheld by both these scholars. However, the precise modality of the disruption remains elusive. The problems that crop up in study of curriculum in isolation from economic and political aspects of a milieu are evident here too. Shahiduliah probes an attempt made by the colonial administration to update the pathshala teacher and curriculum. The attempt adversely affected the enrolment of children from the poorer sections of society. Shahiduliah's rather quick interpretation is that "the lower classes could not comprehend the utility of the changes introduced and began to drop out". It is strange that he gives no weight to the changes made in the school timings - instead of two shifts, one finishing at ten in the morning and the other starting at three in the afternoon, the new, improved schools provided for a single 10 to four session. Shahiduliah himself says that the old "timing of the pathshala hours was so fixed in order to allow children to perform domestic household work in between classes". Why the increased drop-out rate among the lower classes cannot be accounted for by the change in timing, in addition to other changes in the rural economy, but only with reference to curricular change is a question that proves the volume editor's point that contributors have not looked at pedagogic practices from the perspective of the recipient.

Curriculum change is also the theme of papers by J B Harrison, Avril Powell and Nita Kumar. Harrison compares the use of English literature as a university subject in the prominent British and Indian universities. Powell's concern is the appropriation of the past for present political purposes in history textbooks in India and Pakistan. It is interesting that he should describe the NCERT history textbooks as being supportive of the general ethos of the Congress Party. To my mind, such a reading misses out on the finer, and more uniquely Indian, nuances of curricular control,

although it permits the author to make a comparison with the emergence of Pakistan Studies over the past decade. The comparison is weak even on chronological grounds. If indeed the NCERT history textbooks "received reinforcement from the Education Policy of 1986", as the author claims, it would require considerable explaining from a political point of view, given the grave nature of the shifts the Congress had made in its commitment to secularism in the 1980s. Perhaps Nita Kumar is right in suggesting that appropriate pedagogical choices are usually left out in educational planning in India. She makes this observation in the context of two institutions established at the turn of the century in Benares with a specific agenda of cultural socialisation. They failed, she feels, because "they simply did not evolve the pedagogy to match their intentions". The institutions she is referring to were the Central Hindu College and the Arya Mahila School. It is not clear why Nita Kumar finds the politics of their founders "dead on the mark". Perhaps all of the curriculum-related papers in this volume can be seen as exemplifying the need for socio-political context-building.

The oral-literate dichotomy and the practice of documentation would be highly relevant

themes that one might expect to see explored in a volume of this kind. Just two articles present these themes, neither with any clear implications for our understanding of knowledge and control. Francis Robinson puts forward the thesis that the north Indian ulema accepted print technology with enthusiasm because they were apprehensive of the advance that Hinduism and Christianity might make. If this reasoning is correct, why did the ulema's acceptance of print fail to trigger mass literacy in Muslim society? The other point, that the new, literate media rapidly 'disembodied' knowledge, in the sense of impersonating it, merely extends the common sense view popularised by Ong and others. This contention psychologises the effects of literacy to the point of claiming that in predominantly oral societies "there is no room for introspection, for objectivity or analysis". This kind of theory-building has rather limited value for historical and comparative study, but apparently it continues to fascinate some scholars. The paper by Andrew Grout examines the accumulation and documentation of geological information under the auspices of museums. One wishes this aspect of British activism had been portrayed with greater

detail of the involvement of native manpower.

Finally, there are the papers by Helen Kanitkar and Jayant Lele. I have no idea why or how they belong to this volume though they cover interesting matters. Kanitkar looks at juvenile literature associated with empire-building in England, and Lele is concerned about the advancement of Hindu revivalist politics in the recent past. Perhaps the issue of stereotyping, which these papers dwell upon it) different ways and different eras, is what links them to the rest of this volume. Lele argues that "the suppression of some of the critical movements in Indian tradition and dissemination of only the dominant meanings attached to others does not fall within the category of monopolisation of information and knowledge". He is defending the role of the state as an educator of the people. He pleads for a more dynamic perception of knowledge — as competence to interpret messages — to equip the state with better abilities to defend its ideology in future. There is a bit of a paradox here, for history has taught us in many instances that state ideologies thrive on stereotypes, that knowledge as intellectual capacity to critically interpret messages thrives mostly in a struggle perspective.

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